



San Alejandro is a model for what Opening Doors Award represents and continues to demonstrate to visitors what they can make happen in their own parishes.

Tucked in a rural farming community in one of Oregon's most impoverished communities, is an old German parish, St. Alexander. Several decades ago, the community realized that the growth of the Hispanic community would soon burst the doors of the old white board church with a traditional European styled steeple. After a decade of fund raising, the parish realized they could not fund the building of a new sanctuary on their own, and turned to ask for help from the Archdiocese.

The response was amazing, with parishes throughout the Western Oregon Archdiocese corridor offering financial support, pledges, and resources. Two years ago, the Archbishop stood at the entrance of the new church to dedicate this new space.

What is unique about this parish, beyond the language diversity and the poverty, is the total inclusion of the people and the reflection of accessibility that transpired in the architecture of this building. Every possible detail was build into the schematics from the start.



The end result is a model sanctuary for inclusion that reflects the ministry of inclusion led by Fr. David Schiferl. Throughout the Archdiocese, other parishes can now look to this newest church as a representation of what needs to happen for inclusivity; both in the physical building, as well as with the inclusion of all people.

Each month, priests from around the archdiocese come to offer Mass, to support Fr. David as he serves this enormous parish alone. The community itself exists on the funding of pledges from churches from Portland to Eugene. As a larger community, we know that Fr. David has taken the gifts and turned them around ten fold to bless this struggling community. Each priest that visits, returns to their home parish, seeing what is considered "best practice" for inclusive and accessible ministry.



1. Starting at the front door, every single door was designed for wheel chair accessibility. A person using a wheelchair does not need to search for the automatic entrance, each door opens.



2. The doors were carefully tested, so that a person pushing a wheelchair can trigger the button six feet prior to the door, which allows the doors to open, and roll through, without a dance of approaching the door, rolling forward and back to provide clearance to enter.

3. The slope inside the sanctuary was carefully planned for mobility; ramps were created to test the slope on many walkers and rollers, and allowing persons with walkers, canes, wheelchairs, mobility (blind) canes, and those with shuffle walking issues to carefully progress down the aisles to the altar.



4. The baptism font is two tiered, for those walking past, and those strolling and needing a lower dipping level.

5. The baptism water is lightly heated, for those with sensory issues to gently find a comfortable temperature that does not startle or over stimulate.



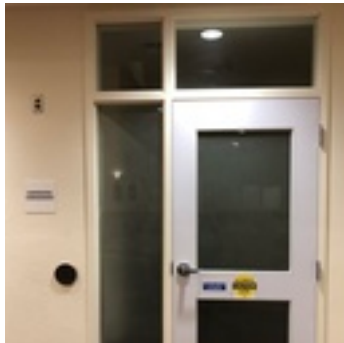
6. Above the baptism font is a camera, allowing those in the front of the sanctuary to view baptisms or the early part of a funeral rite. This has been incredibly helpful for the Deaf community that attends this parish, as they can point to the screen, interpret, and the Deaf can participate more fully with a visual connection to the events in the back.

7. The entire inside of the sanctuary is one level. Not a single step. The idea was that a Priest can also be fully included in this community, even if their mode of transportation is a wheelchair. The entire altar area is gently elevated at gradual ramp, to allow visual access, yet no steps to prevent access.

8. The Sacristy is also completely free of mobile barriers, so that any lay or religious participant can free travel throughout the back rooms.



9. Even the ambo is created for accessibility, with a simple hydraulic lift that lowers the height for wheelchair accessibility. The rails allow for rolling straight up and are strong for a person to use for pulling themselves to standing position.



10. To the left of the altar is a completely accessible confessional. If the priest uses a wheelchair as well as the confessor. The room has ample space for a wheelchair on either side of the partition, and could allow two wheelchair users in the same space. The door to enter is also automatic with an external and internal trigger.



11. Once a month, the Catholic Deaf Hispanic community has a trilingual interpreted Mass. This is Spanish, English, and American Sign Language. Persons from around the area come for this unique Mass with special interpreters that know all three languages. The parents of these parishioners speak their native Spanish, but their Deaf children are learning American Sign Language in school.

12. The interpreters are hooked up with Assisted Listening Devices, to hear the priest as he moves around the sanctuary. These same devices are available to persons that are hard of hearing/Deaf, and need amplification. The usher are trained to pass these out as requested. (Photo is one of our Spanish/ASL/English interpreters at the baptism font, with interpreter plugged into the Assistive Listening Device. One of our young adult Deaf Hispanic members was received into the Church at Pentecost — beautiful representation of the Holy Spirit working through many languages to bring the Good News to everyone!)



13. The side chapel is also accessible for wheelchair entrance. The mural represents everyone in the community, including our Hispanic Deaf youth signing “San Alejandro”.



14. During Mass, sitting on the altar next to the chalice for the Blood of Christ, is a special chalice filled with oral syringes. Whether for a special Mass for persons with disabilities, or any other Mass, any person needing special administration. Each child/adult has their own syringe marked by color and tag.

15. For those with gluten intolerance (eg. Celiac disease), hosts made with low gluten hosts are provided.

16. The lighting in the sanctuary was carefully considered. The lighting does not create shadows, and the upper windows and side windows were strategically placed to avoid direct glare for those with vision issues, and the Deaf needing consistent lighting.

There are so many other ways that Fr. David Schiferl reached out to the Disability Ministry and the Deaf Ministry to make sure we were all included. Fr. Paul Zirimenya, our West Coast Deaf Priest, recommended this grant. He visited our Catholic Young Adult group right after the opening of the new sanctuary and received a personal tour from Fr. David. Fr. Paul is Deaf and came up from San Francisco, so that our community could receive Confession and Communion in ASL. As the Coordinator for Deaf Ministry and second interpreters, we travel an hour to support this parish once a month. We are amazed with the welcome of the people, the graciousness of Fr. David, and the acceptance of our Catholic Deaf young adults.